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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4989  
INFO RUEHRL/AMEMBASSY BERLIN 0092  
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 9720  
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 6656  
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 4716  
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 3407  
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 0399  
RUEHNY/AMEMBASSY OSLO 3499  
RUEHSM/AMEMBASSY STOCKHOLM 0503  
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 2581  
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI 7220  
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI 4995  
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 1628  
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI  
RUEKDIA/DIA WASHDC  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC  
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS  
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RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC  
RHMFISS/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL  
RUCQSOC/USCINCSOC MACDILL AFB FL  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC  
RHHMUNA/USCINCPAC HONOLULU HI

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 002107

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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/20/2016

TAGS: [PTER](#) [PGOV](#) [MOPS](#) [PREL](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: TIGERS APOLOGIZE FOR ABDUCTING 23  
STUDENTS, RELEASE TO ICRC

REF: COLOMBO 2099 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: AMBASSADOR ROBERT O. BLAKE, JR. REASONS: 1.4 (B, D)

¶1. (C) Summary: The "Tamil Tigers" (LTTE) apologized late December 19 for the December 18 "mistaken recruitment" of 23 students from a private tutorial center in Thirukovil, Ampara, releasing the abductees to the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) that evening. Humanitarian interlocutors speculated that the LTTE anticipated an outcry over the highly publicized December 18 forced recruitment, and would like to be seen as abiding by their own "Child Protection Act," passed by the de-facto legislature in October. The Tigers' quick apology and release of the children is unlikely to represent a real change in policy on the use of child soldiers. End Summary.

Blame Karuna? Not So Fast  
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¶2. (C) The "Tamil Tigers" (LTTE) apologized late December 19 for the December 18 "mistaken recruitment" of 23 students from a private tutorial center in Thirukovil, Ampara, releasing the abductees to the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) that evening. The Government of Sri Lanka (GSL) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) had decried the abductions of the 16 and 17 year olds and their two teachers. Several of our interlocutors had blamed the LTTE-breakaway Karuna faction for the disappearances (reftel).

Tiger Child Protection Act  
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¶3. (C) On October 16, the "Tamil Eelam Legislature," the de-facto judiciary in the LTTE-controlled Vanni, passed a "Child Protection Act" making education compulsory through grade 11 and outlawing the recruitment of children under 17 and participation in combat for children under 18. A December 20 press release published on the LTTE's "Peace Secretariat" website declared that the 23 students had

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"expressed willingness" to join the organization before being transported to an LTTE training base in Ampara on the night of December 18. When the LTTE Commander in the area discovered that many of the youths were underage he "immediately ordered the release of the entire batch" and sought expulsion from the organization of the LTTE cadres involved in the recruitment. On November 22, the LTTE released to the ICRC 22 minors they claimed had lied about their ages in order to join the LTTE.

Public Relations Move?

¶4. (C) UNICEF Protection Officer Andy Brook told pol FSN December 20 that he would go to the site in Thirukovil to inquire whether the students had indeed "volunteered" to join the Tigers. The Ampara district desk officer for the Consortium of Humanitarian Agencies (CHA), an umbrella group for NGOs, contended that due to poverty and a scarcity of food in the north and east, many youths voluntarily join the LTTE for daily meals and shelter.

¶5. (C) Several of our interlocutors were quick to blame the LTTE-breakaway Karuna faction for the disappearances

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(reftel). The Sri Lanka Human Rights Commission (HRC) coordinator for Ampara told pol FSN December 20: "The Karuna group recruits more actively in the Ampara and Batticaloa districts, and we are surprised that the LTTE carried out this particular abduction." She speculated that the LTTE anticipated an outcry over the highly publicized December 18 forced recruitment, and "would like to be seen as abiding by their legislature's Child Protection Act."

Listening to Rock

¶6. (C) COMMENT: This case is unusual in that the LTTE almost immediately declared their "mistake" by acknowledging the recruitment and releasing the children and their teachers. It may represent an attempt to improve the Tigers' public image after an October 30 report by United Nations Special Advisor for Children in Armed Conflict Alan Rock found the LTTE to be still actively recruiting children despite the prohibition of underage recruitment in the 2002 Ceasefire Agreement. The move is less likely to represent a Tigers' change of heart on the use of child soldiers.  
BLAKE